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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses generally the impact of the Brown decision of 1954 on education. It presents five major "lessons" suggested by the history of school desegregation: (1) the attack on bigotry and injustice must be fought on all fronts--with votes, political interest groups, multicultural education, economic planning, and political consolidation. Litigation will not by itself solve problems with deep roots in social and economic conditions. (2) Liberty and equality are not polar opposites: equal opportunity must be seen as a goal necessary to all. (3) At present, in some ways, society is more segregated than ever: people have found ways to resegregate, not on specific racial grounds, but with results that are just as destructive to fairness and justice. (4) The costs of social change are charged always to those who are least able to afford the strain. Desegregated schools are no solution as long as society's politics, housing, incomes class structures and churches are segregated. (5) The nostalgia and resentment that follow radical social change generate the pernicious myth that there is a great, good place in the past that society must return to because it has gone too far. The inertia and resistance to the impact of Brown, on the part of active opponents as well as those who yearned for more comfortable times, was underestimated. The Brown case illustrates a first principle: equality is a good thing that needs no defense. (KH)

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FROM HERE--WHERE?

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Between the idea
and the reality
Between the motion
and the act
Falls the Shadow

T. S. Elliot

What happens to a dream deferred
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore - and then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over - like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.
Or does it explode? Langston Hughes

We are here today to consider the state of education thirty years after Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. We also want to bear witness to a significant past. We stand in this place, where at a different time the actions we took reverberate through the present and point to a possible and necessary future. An insight of George Santayana is appropriate at this point. "We must welcome the future remembering that soon it will be the past. And we must respect the past, remembering that once it was all that was humanly possible."

As one who spent eighteen years here as a Personnel Dean (1958-1966), I do not pretend to be a neutral observer, objectively analyzing historical phenomena. Like the Greek historian Thucydides, "Part of this I saw, and part of this I was." I want to honor that history, for as Thucydides said of his own, "My history is an everlasting possession, not a prize composition which is heard and and forgotten." The extraordinary history of West Virginia State College is a possession we much cherish and guard, for there are no permanent victories in the wars for equality and justice.

Presented at the Symposium celebrating Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court Decision of 1954 (Institute, WV, February 10-11 and April 11-13, 1954).

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It is imperative that I pause and pay honor to whom honor is due, the late president, Dr. John W. Davis, of whom it was said that "West Virginia State College was his lengthened shadow." Years before Brown Dr. Davis told his faculty that, "The function of a Negro college is to work itself out of a job and become a college for all students," and he acted on that principle by building a high-quality, integrated faculty long before Brown. His eminent successor, President William J. L. Wallace, with indomitable spirit insisted after Brown that "We are going to be part of the solution and not the problem." With enormous resolution and disciplined impatience, he formulated effective policy and took positive, decisive action as the keeper of a dream--that West Virginia State College would become "a living laboratory in human relations." Governor Marland of West Virginia, when asked how deliberately was he going to speed desegregation, replied, "We will abide by the Supreme Court decision. Now!"

At the time of the Supreme Court's decision, West Virginia State was an all Black college. Two years later over one-half the student body was white. This change was accomplished without the devastating outcomes predicted by the prophets of doom and gloom--no catastrophic racial incidents, no inglorious compromise of salient principles. The Student Personnel deans brought faculty, staff, and students together to discuss the challenges of present and future settings which emphasized our common humanity. We planned, we watched, we waited. We succeeded. We reaffirmed Mark Twain's insight "Always do right: this will gratify some people and astonish the rest." Those who participated in that process are now scattered to the far reaches of the world, determined to personalize and institutionalize their learnings and eliminate the sanctified stupidities of our nation's past. We need to honor our past here, not only out of pardonable pride, but also because we

know that there are some lessons in history. There are some things worth repeating, and the success of "integration in reverse" is one of them. We must affirm this because of recent attempts to make part of the conventional wisdom the notions that somehow (1) desegregation is over with and no longer needed; or, conversely (2) it's gone too far and it didn't work anywhere anyway.

West Virginia State College continues to perpetuate its illustrious tradition by this distinguished lecture series highlighting one of the magnificent moments in American history. Richard Kluger in his fascinating provocative book Simple Justice (a book on Brown) asserts "Probably no case ever to come before the nation's highest tribunal affected more directly the minds, hearts, and daily lives of so many Americans...The decision marked the turning point in America's willingness to face the consequences of centuries of racial discrimination, a practice tracing back nearly to the first settlement of the New World."[1] Diane Ravitch in The Troubled Crusade observes:

> Never had the Supreme Court reached so deeply into the lives, laws, and the mores of so many people; nearly half the states of the nation were living according to laws that the Court had ruled unconstitutional. Approximately 40 percent of the public school pupils in the nation were enrolled in segregated schools.[2]

Ravitch views this Supreme Court decision as a radical change from an inglorious past. It was the Supreme Court in the post-reconstruction period that allowed the resotration of white supremacy in former slave states, allowed the removal of Blacks from voting roles and allowed Jim Crow laws to maintain strict racial separation.[3]

There is a profound sense in which Brown calls attention to the splendor and the contradictions of American history. It is a history of ecstacy and agony. Our purposes as well as our predicament make a balanced perspective essential to our progress. A disciplined look in retrospect for 30 years

may illuminate the past, inform the present, and chart the possible and probable in a challenging, ominous future.

We must not capitulate to the cynicism that claims we do not learn from the past. We are not Prometheus Bound or Camus' resigned Sysiphus. Our perspective should acknowledge the insight of H. G. Wells that "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe."[4] It garners enormous wisdom in the caution of George Santayana "Those who cannot remember the past are condemmed to repeat it."[5]

We must ask ourselves the question, "What has Brown taught us? In what language shall we articulate our learnings? What is the distilled wisdom that comes out of our past experience?

The progress in the thirty years since the Court's decision striking down segregation in the schools has been marked by both triumph and tragedy: the triumph of the Civil Rights Laws which are bringing millions of the previously disenfranchised into the mainstream of American politics where they can speak (and vote) for themselves; the tragedy of delay, violence, assassinations, and the raising of unenlightened self-interest to stand as the highest ideal of a Presidency. We need to ask ourselves why, after thirty years, has the momentum of the Civil Rights movement radically diminished? Why, after the course was charted so clearly, when so much had been accomplished, why have the myths of "enough," and "we've gone too far" arisen with so much power to block the creation of a fair and just nation? Is our dream deferred going to dry up like a raisin in the sun? The dream will die if we do not attend to the lessons of history. To paraphrase Bernard Shaw, "only those who have nothing to teach or do not want to learn" believe that we cannot gain useful instruction from the past. Let me suggest what some of these lessons might be.

Lesson No. 1

Our history embodies a fascinating interplay of forces. In Brown and its subsequent implementation and acceptance we see the interplay of forces emanating from the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Brown was in 1954 a court decision and there were attempts to overthrow or nullify that decision. President Eisenhower did as little as he possibly could until he saw that he must uphold the law in Little Rock. President Eisenhower asserted that "People have a right to disagree with the Supreme Court decision - since the Supreme Court has disagreed with its own decision of 60 years standing - but, of course, the new decision should now be carried out."[6] Southern senators attempted to harrass the federal judges who prevented local school systems from ignoring or evading the impact of Brown. Ravitch describes the vehement responses to Brown by the southern states.[7] Discrimination against Blacks turned out to be more than a southern phenomenon, it was a national problem.[8]

However, in spite of resistance, by the mid 1960's Brown had become the policy of the land enacted even more broadly by civil rights legislation and executive presidential commitment. Maximal progress was made when there was a confluence of all three branches of government.

We must learn as well from a second set of interacting forces--the forces exerted by brave leadership, on the one hand, and those exerted by a democratic populace with deeply held humane values on the other. On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court, (the least democratic branch of the national government), felt no compulsion "to nourish the collective biases of the electorate" and reaffirmed the inherent equality of mankind - one of the fundamental, self-evident truths in the American belief system. The court provided critical

leadership at a crucial point in history but its leadership had an effect and prevailed because its action reaffirmed a fundamental belief of Americans. Thus, Brown was not only a legal decision, it was also political and symbolic--"political" in the best sense of that term. Consititutional decisions are not self-enforcing. They cannot run contrary to the deepest values of our people. The truth of the matter is, the Supreme Court functions in a complex political environment. Mr. Dooley observed, "I don't know whether the Constitution follows the flag or not, but the Supreme Court follows the election returns." The Dred Scott decision, one of the worst decisions ever promulgated by an American court, shows what happens when humanity, justice and the moral foundations of the nation are ignored in favor of class expediency. Justice Taney asserted "a Negro has no rights that a white man is bound to respect." Civil War is too high a price to pay for judicial arrogance. It was the genius of the Warren Court that it looked to the future and tried to prepare the nation for it in the Brown decision of 1954.

If any lesson has become at all clear from the history of the embattled retreat from segregation it is that the attack on bigotry and injustice has to be fought on all fronts--with votes, political interest groups, multicultural education, economic planning, and above all, with allies North and South, of every complexion, in each political party and from each social and economic class. Litigation will not by itself solve problems with deep and stubborn roots in economic and social conditions. That is, the issue of segregation is (or ought to be) legally settled. The political, social, and economic implementation is and has to be the continuing concern of political and moral coalitions. The lesson is, then, that we cannot predicate our total trust, our hope, our faith on the government as the watchdog or legislator of institutional or individual behavior. Legal decisions are an outgrowth

and an expression of the prevailing ethos. The forming of that ethos is our proper business.

Lesson No. 2

Opponents of equal opportunity deliberately frame the questions in words which elicit a negative response, designed to bring out the worst in people. One of the most curious of the half-truths that has been bruited about by the neo-segregationists is the recasting of the American Dilemma in terms of Equal Opportunity versus Quotas. In their more hysterical moments they seem to find Robespierre and his guillotine lurking beneath every civil rights belief.

We have a new rhetoric of justified inequality--a rehetoric of sounding brass and tinkling cymbal. What we must not do is to allow the argument to be set in these terms. We must point out as often and in as many places as possible that liberty and equality are not polar opposite qualities. We must talk in terms of equal opportunity as the necessary condition which we must reach. The question before us in education and the schools is the question of at least equal opportunity, at least a fair start in life, at least an educational entitlement that allows all children to choose the path to a life that is personally enriching, socially useful, economically rewarding, and spiritually fulfilling.

We must ask of our leaders that they attend to the citizens aspirations and hopes, their aspirations not only for themselves but also for their children. The sour quality of much of what we hear from elected officials dishonors the speakers and the people who elect them. The astonishing contention that people are hungry by choice, (if hunger exists) is typical of this kind of discourse. Evidently the price of standing tall in the saddle is impaired moral vision.

Our lesson here is that history can bring out the worst in us and the best in us. We must be constantly vigilant to insure the agenda of equality and justice is set in terms defined and acted upon by persons of good will, not the apostles of selfishness.[9] The ancient and dishonorable notion that private vice is public virtue has no application to the questions of equality and justice. The terms of discourse must become and remain ours, not the property of equality's enemies. Slogans, such as "the courts are color blind," are not solutions regardless of whoever coins them.

Lesson No. 3

We must realize that thirty years after Brown we have moved into a new and perhaps more dangerous period. Bigotry needs no racial segregation if its desires can be satisfied by an economically and socially segregated school system. In many ways, we are a more segregated society now than we were thirty years ago. While it would be difficult to find anybody who would not affirm the principle that an educated citizenry is a necessary condition of a free society, it is not difficult at all to find the David Stockmans, the George Gilders, and the Robert Bartleys to provide the meretricious statistics, the disgraceful equivocations, and the mean, sneering rhetoric to justify the squeezing of social programs that the well-off do not need.

We have found ways to resegregate, not on specific racial grounds, but with results that are just as destructive to fairness and justice. We have been made painfully aware, in the years since Brown, that education is about more than education and schooling. It is about politics and economics. If our nation becomes more and more divided between high and low income and between the employed and unemployed; if the burden of economic recession is borne disproportionately by minorities; if the poor become more and more

segregated; if access to decent schools becomes more and more geographically difficult, if we are developing in America a class system of education, where the futures and aspirations of individuals are determined for them by the kinds of schools they attend, what need has bigotry for racial segregation? Lesson No. 4

There is a cost to this resegregation that we have not yet learned to calculate. We have allowed the obsession with the alleged costs of desegregation to obscure what our real concern should be: the cost of segregation to institutions, communities, groups, and individuals. We should add the devastating, intangible moral and psychological costs of segregation, not only to its direct victims, the segregated, but also to the privileged. The terrible burden of bigotry is manifested in distress about the quality of schools, in the strain of "changing neighborhoods," in the tensions among those who have to undergo unwanted social dislocation. Balanced against these debits, the costs of busing are trivial. What we have learned, and what we must constantly remind ourselves is that the costs of social change are charged always to those who are the least able to afford the strain. When the schools become agents of social change, we often force children to do adults work. The psychological costs are incalculable.

The lesson is that we must take account of the frustration and peril that follow in the wake of extravagant expectation. Evil is resilient--it takes no Bible study to tell us that. On May 17, 1954, we did not understand the magnitude of the task. We did not understand that good will alone is not enough. We did not understand that persons who said they supported "separate but equal" because it was law, (Plessy v. Ferguson) would not support "with all deliberate speed" when it became the law (Brown v. Topeka). We did not

understand that the long years of preparation leading to the successful argument before the Supreme Court may have been only the beginning, and perhaps not the most difficult part of the task. We have futilely pursued simplistic solutions without understanding the inextricable interdependence of our social institutions. Desegregated schools are no solution as long as our politics, our housing, our incomes, our class structure, and our churches are segregated.[10]

Lesson No. 5

The nostalgia and resentment that follow radical social change generate the pernicious myth that there is a great, good place in the past that we must return to because we have gone too far. With newly found freedom in the land of promise, we still yearn for the flesh pots of Egypt. In the words of Marshall McLuhan, "We march into the future looking into the rear-view mirror." Years ago an old farmer in Hilltop, West Virginia remarked to me, "Things ain't what they used to be." Then he added philosophically, "In fact, they never was."

The lesson is that we underestimated the inertia and resistance to the impact of Brown, not only among those who resisted to the last breath acknowledging the Supreme Court's laying down of the law, but also among those who, while paying lip service to constitutional principles, yearned for more comfortable days.

* * * *

Before we can usefully begin any discussion of what to do about the present sorry retreat from a possibly better world, we have to reaffirm a first principle:

Equality is a good thing that needs no defense. Its shifting definitions over time are no excuse for questioning its validity. We believe in equality

before the law. We believe that all persons are created equal. We believe that the privileges of wealth, position, class, and status must be offset by high quality education for all. We believe that discrimination is an abomination that cannot be tolerated in the distribution of educational and other societal resources. We believe that conflicts between liberty and equality are trivial compared to what they both contribute to the lives of free people in a free society. One is necessary to the other. We believe that our schools must reflect, embody, and exemplify the values of freedom and equality.

* * * *

There have been many attempts to rewrite the history of Brown to make it appear that there was something equivocal, hesitating, reluctant, or otherwise muddled in the minds of the Justices of the Supreme Court who ordered the school systems at litigation to proceed "with all deliberate speed," in the May 31, 1955 Brown II decision. Those who were satisfied with the status quo have misread the court's intent. We have tended to invoke the compromise of principle, when in truth politics is equally concerned with the art of the necessary. The phrase "all deliberate speed" was not invented by the Supreme Court. It appears in Scottish law (cf. Sir Walter Scott) as an order to do it now, and carefully.[11]

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